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Hussein Again Holds the Reins On a President

Jordan's King Hussein is playing a cat-and-mouse game with President Reagan.

The doughty little monarch, as usual, has worked his way into position to have a U.S. president eating out of his hand. This is all the more astonishing because the king has bombarded Reagan with bizarre, lengthy, personal letters. One was so rude that no response was made.

Hussein is now the president's pampered guest in Washington. His little Bedouin kingdom is situated strategically right at the center of Reagan's Middle East peace plan. Without Hussein, Reagan would have a peace table with no one sitting at it.

Reagan sees the king as a possible strategic partner, and is ready to offer him a generous gift of arms. But intelligence reports describe Hussein as "uncomfortable" with this role and hesitant to sit down at the bargaining table. He would like the military aid without the strategic honor.

The last four presidents have learned that Hussein is an erratic but wily ruler who knows how to

play diplomatic hardball. His public image is polished, meticulously polite and controlled. But a turbulent personality seethes behind this disciplined royal image.

According to intelligence sources, he has severe mood swings and may even be a manic-depressive. He likes to vent his spleen in personal letters that would quiver the stripes on a diplomat's trousers.

He once wrote a secret letter to President Nixon threatening to go on a "ghazou" unless he got U.S. aid. A ghazou is a Bedouin raid on a neighboring tribe. "We might have to go on a ghazou, an old Arab tribal custom, and get it, Sir, from some quarter or other in this neighborhood," he wrote, "possibly causing you a problem which may be even more serious than the one I am now posing."

Hussein fired off an equally blunt letter to President Ford. If the United States didn't provide Jordan with \$350 million worth of anti-aircraft missiles, he told the president, Jordan would buy them from the Soviet Union. And he pointedly noted that the Soviets had offered him a complete air defense system, which he eventually bought.

Sources told my reporters Lucette Lagnado and Andrea Siegle that Hussein has continued to write blustering, at times offensive, letters to presidents. Reagan administration irritation reached a new high last year when the king released the con-

tents of one letter to the Jordanian press before Reagan even received it.

But Reagan and his aides are not likely to reveal their pique to the king this week. Not only is Hussein crucial to the success of the president's Middle East peace plan, but he has once again begun blowing kisses at the Kremlin.

Last year, Hussein raised chuckles when he visited Moscow and heaped praise on the Soviets. At a May 26, 1981, dinner in the Kremlin, the king repeatedly referred to Leonid Brezhnev as a "dear friend" and expressed "profound satisfaction . . . in developing and consolidating the relations between our countries."

Even more distressing to the Reagan administration was Hussein's praise of the Soviet peace plan for the Middle East. The king told the Soviets that Jordan welcomed their proposal to convene an international conference on the Near East with [the Palestine Liberation Organization] taking part on an equal basis with the other sides. Hussein then proceeded to issue a joint communique with the Soviets that made repeated favorable references to the "international conference."

U.S. officials remain confident that Hussein will not switch allegiances, but the administration is hedging its bet by attempting to negotiate a new arms deal for Jordan. The package includes advanced U.S. fighter-bombers and is expected to trigger a fight in Congress.